

REPORT

OF THE

POSTMASTER GENERAL,

Made in compliance with a resolution of the Senate in relation to dead letters, drop letters, and letters held for postage, or postage not prepaid.

MAY 8, 1860.—Referred to the Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads.

MAY 9, 1860,—Motion to print referred to the Committee on Printing.

MAY 16, 1860.—Report in favor of printing the usual number submitted, considered, and agreed to.

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT, May 7, 1860.

SIR: In compliance with a resolution of the Senate, adopted March 9, 1859, I submitted, in my annual report of 3d of December following, some general suggestions on the subject of dead letters, promising to make a further report at a subsequent period. Accordingly, I now beg leave to give the result of investigations which have been diligently pursued up to the present time.

A full enumeration for the two additional quarters, ended 30th of September and 31st of December, 1859, has confirmed the correctness of my first estimate of "two and a half millions as the number of letters annually consigned to the Dead Letter Office, including about 500,000 'drop letters' and 50,000 'held for postage,'" or postage not prepaid.

The inquiry of the Senate as to "what further legislation is necessary to diminish the number of such letters," I find myself, after the most careful study, unable satisfactorily to answer.

The late act of Congress, approved April 6, 1860, providing that when any person shall indorse on any letter his or her name and place of residence, the same shall be returned, if not called for within a given time, if generally observed, will naturally effect the desired object, greatly to the advantage of this department and the public. But it may be safely doubted whether the great mass of letter writers will readily comply with the requirements of this law, and whether for this reason the number of dead letters will be thereby sensibly diminished. The privilege of making the prescribed indorsement has, hitherto, been sanctioned, and the fact that it has rarely been exercised, as found by actual examination of the dead letters, seems to indicate, on the part of the public, a repugnance to give anything like publicity to private correspondence. The bare announcement of the name of the writer would, to those acquainted with the parties, involve, to a degree at

least, an invasion of the privacy of the communication, to which the majority of the correspondents would probably not submit.

There was formerly a standing regulation of the department in the hands of all postmasters, suggesting that writers could have their letters preserved by writing their names and residences on the sealed side, but it remained practically inoperative, and was, therefore, omitted from the subsequent published regulations. Still, it is beneficial to this department to be sustained by the law in question, especially as it is believed to be the only enactment that affords any promise of diminishing the number of dead letters, and every means shall be adopted to encourage the observance of its provisions.

It has been proposed that thirty days after letters are advertised and not called for, a circular should be sent to the office where each was mailed, stating that fact, and that on the receipt of a stamped envelope, the letter would be returned in it to the writer. Whether such a plan could be practically and effectively carried out, to any considerable extent, is doubtful.

Thousands of letters are written by transient persons of whom the postmaster at the mailing office knows nothing. Again: many letters are addressed at random to transient persons who are traveling, and on unimportant matters, and the writers of such, if found and notified, would probably not reclaim them. These facts have been demonstrated by actual experiment made in this department. Out of one thousand cases, two thirds of the writers did not wish to recover their letters; and in four hundred and forty-five cases out of one thousand five hundred, the writers of the letters could not be found.

Even in the smaller class of post offices there would be difficulties in finding the writers of letters on notices such as proposed; but in the city post offices the difficulties would, of course, be much greater—amounting, indeed, it would seem, almost to an impossibility.

An ingenious plan for diminishing the number of dead letters has been proposed and elaborately explained by Oliver Evans Wood, Esq., which demands notice. He recommends what he terms “suspended letter lists,” being advertisements of letters which have remained three months in post offices uncalled for. Instead of returning such, as is now done, to the Dead Letter Office, he proposes sending them to “suspended letter offices” for certain States or districts, for publication, weekly, semi-monthly, or monthly, and that copies of such lists be sent to each post office of the States or districts, whence the letters have been forwarded as not delivered, and also to the county towns of other States, for the information of persons who may have failed to receive letters because of misdirection or change of residence, and also for reference on the part of persons desiring to know if letters that they had addressed to others had failed to be delivered. In order to avoid confusion from the similarity of names, there is to be affixed to the name of the person addressed, some designation serving to distinguish his letters from others addressed to persons of the same name; and, finally, he suggests that the name and post office of the writer appear on the letter, so that it may be returned to him, if not called for.

Admitting that the difficulties growing out of the similarity of

names might be overcome by the careful direction of letters, as indicated, and that the writers' names would be given on the letters. I am still unable to resist the conviction that the results which the "suspended letter lists" would accomplish, would not justify the expenditure of money and of labor which the practical enforcement of the system would involve.

Mr. Wood has corresponded with the department, and, after duly considering his plans, the difficulties in the way of executing them were presented somewhat at length in a letter, of July 21, 1859, a copy of which (marked A) is hereto annexed.

After the most careful consideration, I am constrained to believe that the chief improvement in the Dead Letter Office must be effected by providing for the return of letters, through that office, in greater numbers, and at short periods, to the writers. This is the third point suggested by the resolution of the Senate.

In reference to returning the whole number (2,500,000) of letters, whether containing valuables or not, I may say that this could probably be done with thirty-five additional clerks, provided none but those letters containing money or other valuable inclosures, were registered and entered on the books, as at present, but it would be, to a considerable extent, labor lost, because in very many cases, no doubt, from the migratory habits of our people, and from other causes, the writers could not be found. The letters, then, would again be returned to the Dead Letter Office, and in many cases the letters, being unimportant, the writers would not care to receive them.

As stated in my general report, the attempt has been made to ascertain something of public opinion on the subject of restoring to the writers dead letters *not* containing inclosures of value. Fifteen hundred letters of this class were selected, and circulars sent to the postmasters where mailed to ascertain whether the writers of such desired their recovery, and also the reasons why the persons addressed failed to receive them.

Answers were received from 1,055, the writers of the other 445 not being found or failing to answer. Three hundred and sixty-six of the writers wished their letters returned, and three hundred and twenty-three had been originally misdirected.

From this experiment (confirmed by observation in the regular course of business) it may be assumed that not one half of the whole number of dead letters are of such value or importance as to justify their return to the writers. It is, however, perfectly certain that many letters of importance are now destroyed which should be preserved, it being impossible, with the limited number of clerks, to do more than simply look for inclosures.

I set down the proportion at less than one third, or say 600,000; for, apart from the large number of circulars and clearly unimportant letters entering into the general enumeration, (of 2,500,000,) there are thousands of letters without the writer's name or post office address, or when the address is given, so badly written that it cannot be read.

The selection, examination, and return of this number of letters (without keeping any special account of them in books, as is done with

letters containing money,) would probably require ten clerks in addition to the present force of the office.

They would, of course, be obliged to glance at the contents of all the letters, say 7,000 or 8,000 daily, the mere opening of which and looking for inclosures require now the constant and close attention of four clerks. This improvement of the service is clearly needed, and would, I think, fully satisfy the public. It should, at least, be fairly tested; and I would, therefore, suggest that the Postmaster General be authorized to employ not exceeding ten temporary clerks, (of class one, at \$1,200 per annum,) and be required to report specially to Congress at the next session the number of letters returned to the writers, with such information as could be obtained calculated to throw light on the subject as to whether such returns are satisfactory or otherwise. In no other way, I think, can it be ascertained what legislation will be best adapted to meet the wants of the public in reference to dead letters.

As to the expense, I presume there can be no objection, considering the important interests involved; but I venture to suggest that the unclaimed money of the Dead Letter Office would go far towards paying the proposed additional clerks, the annual amount being now between \$3,000 and \$4,000. Under the act of Congress approved March 3, 1825, (4 Statutes, 409,) such money may be appropriated to the use of the department, and this has accordingly been done; but it has not been considered allowable to use the money for extra clerk hire.

The amount of money accruing from dead letters, deposited in the United States Treasury within a period of six years, exceeds \$30,000, which it would seem most appropriate to restore from the general treasury, in whole or in part, as Congress may decide, for the purpose of improving the branch of business through which that money accrued.

It is of course necessary, above all things in connection with this subject, to provide for the delivery of letters without the intervention of the Dead Letter Office, as designed by the new law already referred to; and should its provisions be applied generally to the millions of letters passing through the mails, it will accomplish a most salutary reform. But, under the most favorable view, its effects will scarcely be appreciable within a shorter period than one year. Meanwhile, letters may be restored to the writers, and experiments made at the Dead Letter Office (according to the means which Congress may provide) which, it is confidently believed, will lead to satisfactory results scarcely otherwise attainable.

Some reforms have already been made, both by enforcing old and salutary regulations of the department, which had fallen into disuse, and by adopting new ones which the service manifestly needed.

Among the latter is the requirement (referred to in my annual report) under which weekly, semi-monthly, and monthly returns of dead letters are made, according to the frequency of advertising, so that none shall remain in post offices over three months after they have been advertised, and more than half of the whole number of dead letters are now thus returned. The effects have been found so favorable as to justify the more general application of the same rule. Under former instructions, all unclaimed letters were retained until the expiration of the quarter

succeeding the one during which they were advertised, so that many letters became five and some nearly six months old before reaching the Dead Letter Office.

I invite attention to the annexed list (marked B) of the principal offices now making such returns, showing the number of letters from each. This improvement has entailed additional duties on two clerks who were before too heavily tasked, and it cannot be generally applied without more assistance.

Misdirections tend more largely than any other cause to swell the number of dead letters, and many errors of this sort are now corrected by postmasters who exchange their advertised letter lists. Such exchanges have, however, only been made to a limited extent, between some of the principal cities, at the will of postmasters, whereas they should be regularly systematized and required, not only of the larger class of offices, (those of towns and cities,) but of all offices bearing similar names.

Recent experience has also shown that other salutary reforms may be effected by proper instructions to postmasters, all, however, having reference rather to a more systematic and frequent return of dead letters to this department than to any material reduction of their number.

As to "any further legislation," I can merely suggest, in case it should please Congress to provide for the return of a greater number of letters to the writers, that the present law, (section twenty-six, act approved March 3, 1825,) requiring them to remain three months in post offices, should be changed so as to shorten the period to two months, except in the case of letters at seaports, intended for persons on board of ships expected to arrive. It will then also be proper to change the designation of "Dead Letter Office" to *Returned Letter Office*.

In this connection it may not be inappropriate to state what amount of labor is required in the Dead Letter Office, and what is the regular, clerical, and other force allowed for performing such labor.

More than 28,000 separate accounts of postmasters are received each quarter, making about 114,000 in the year.

Each package must be carefully opened, and the dead letters separated from post bills and transcripts. This heavy labor falls on two clerks. Then the letters from each office are compared with the accompanying bill; those originating in foreign countries are separated and transmitted to the countries in which they originated, and the domestic (American) letters are opened, their contents of value registered, and the letters returned to their owners. The registration involves the entry of the name of the writer, the name and post office of the person addressed, place whence mailed, and description of contents, besides filling up a circular letter of instructions and blank receipt in each case, and filing and entering returned receipts. Upwards of 20,000 letters a year are thus disposed of by only four clerks, while the task of comparing all the dead letters (2,500,000) with post bills, and separating and forwarding foreign letters, (over 130,000,) devolves on two clerks.

The regular number of clerks allowed for opening letters is only three, which being, however, entirely insufficient, assistance has been

obtained by requiring a laborer to open accounts, and transferring a clerk to the more responsible work of opening letters. Even four persons cannot possibly take time to examine letters further than barely to look for money and other inclosures.

In addition, there are miscellaneous duties, such as examining daily for lost letters and packages, and attending to correspondence, which might well occupy the time of two clerks, whereas but one is allowed. Another clerk prepares for registration and forwarding the letters containing money, has exclusive charge of those which cannot be delivered and of special correspondence in reference to the same, and generally supervises the details of business. It is impossible, by description, adequately to convey an idea of the amount of labor performed. It cannot be appreciated except upon actual observation in all its details. The constant pressure is such as to allow no time for careful examination. Everything must be hastened; and so far from attempting to make material improvements in the service, with the present force employed, it is found impossible fully to keep up the current business.

Attention is invited to the annexed tables (marked C and D) showing the operations of the Dead Letter Office each year, from 1855, to 31st March, 1860, so far as concerns letters containing money or other valuable inclosures.

In addition, hundreds of packages remain in the office for want of information as to the owners, there being now an accumulation of over three thousand daguerreotypes, besides other articles.

The dead letters in California, Oregon, and Washington Territory, are examined in San Francisco, agreeably to section three, act approved July 27, 1854, entitled an "Act making provision for the postal service in the States of California," &c., &c. (For the last annual report up to 30th September, 1859, see statement, marked E, hereto appended.)

The chief causes of the accumulation of dead letters are clearly traceable to the restless lives and careless habits of the American people. Thousands of letters are directed to persons who are moving from place to place, and can therefore only be reached, as it were, by chance, and still more are imperfectly or improperly directed. As many as twelve hundred of this class have been received at one time from one small distributing office, and it must be more from inadvertence than ignorance of the law, that fifty thousand letters annually fail to reach their destination for want of prepayment of postage. As a still more convincing proof of carelessness, it may be stated that hundreds of letters are found *entirely without addresses*.

Such causes are of course beyond the control of legislation, and for their removal we must look to time and to the people themselves.

So far as there may be a lack of solicitude and vigilance on the part of postmasters, every possible measure will be adopted in the administration of the department to affect the necessary reform.

I have the honor to be, &c.,

J. HOLT,
Postmaster General.

Hon. JOHN C. BRECKINRIDGE,
President Senate United States.

A.

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT,
July 21, 1859.

SIR: Your letter of the 25th June, as well as the communication to which it refers, was received, and have been carefully considered.

The vast accumulation of dead letters in the post offices of our country, has attracted the attention of Congress, and in compliance with a resolution of that body, many minds in the different branches of the postal service are now occupied with the question as to what can best be done to remedy this acknowledged and growing evil. Among the many valuable suggestions which have been submitted to me, none has been more thoroughly and patiently examined in its detail, than the plan devised by yourself, and so elaborately explained and impressed in the communication alluded to. It is ingenious and feasible, but I have not been able to resist the conviction that the results which it would accomplish would not justify the expenditure of money and of labor which the practical enforcement of the systems would involve. To a nomadic population, your plan would be admirably adapted, and therefore in the mining districts of our Pacific possession, its introduction would no doubt lead to the delivery of many letters which now fail to reach their destination. But it possesses no special adaptation to a population of fixed homes, and its advantages, if adopted among such a people, would be slight, as compared with the cost at which they would be purchased. The list which you propose shall be prepared (quarterly I presume, as at present) by the department of the dead letters, and permanently exhibited in each of the post offices of the State or Territory whence the letters have been forwarded as not delivered, would probably give much less practical publicity to their existence than you suppose. Take for example the State of New York, in which there are upwards of 2,500 post offices. In the city of New York alone there are near 70,000 dead letters returned per quarter. If to these be added those from every other office in the State, the list would assume a magnitude that would discourage all inquiry. The very vastness of the field to be explored, would lead rather to the concealment than the disclosure of the letters sought to be delivered. Again the prevailing similarity of names in our country would present great, if not insuperable obstacles. The directory shows that in the city of New York alone there are 200 John Smiths, 132 William Smiths, 100 James Smiths, 100 John Browns, 70 William Browns, 50 James Browns, 90 John Murphys, 50 James Murphys, 90 James Sullivans, &c., &c., &c. When you add to these all the similar names found throughout the entire State, you can at once perceive how formidable the list would become. You would probably find not scores, but hundreds of letters addressed to the same name, and yet not intended for one, but for hundreds of different persons. How would such letters be delivered under your system? If claimed by individuals bearing the proper name, to which of the claimants would they be sent; or in what proportion, or upon what principle would they be distributed? The hopeless embarrassment and interminable correspondence which would result from this aggre-

gation of all these letters at a point where there could be no personal knowledge of the persons to whom they are addressed, must be manifest. An occasional letter would of course be thus saved from destruction, but the play would not be worth the candle.

Under our present system almost all the dead letters really valuable are delivered to the writers, if not to those to whom they are addressed. Those not valuable in the sense of the statute would scarcely justify the bestowal of the labor and money for their delivery, which your system would necessarily require.

The accumulation of dead letters results in part from a lack of solicitude and vigilance on the part of postmasters, and in part from the careless habits and comparatively restless lives of the American people. Every possible measure will be adopted, in the administration of the department, to remove the cause first named; for the removal of the latter, we must look to time and the people themselves.

For your communication, which manifests much thought and an earnest and laudable desire to coöperate in the attainment of a great public good, you have my sincere thanks.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. HOLT,
Postmaster General.

Mr. OLIVER EVANS WOODS, *Philadelphia.*

B.

Statement of dead letters received during the year ending March 31, 1860, from offices making weekly, semi-monthly, and monthly returns.

Office.	State.	Domestic.	Drop.	Foreign.	Total.
Albany	New York	8,086	1,445	853	10,384
Baltimore	Maryland	16,394	16,456	1,177	34,027
Buffalo	New York	10,597	17,989	2,288	30,874
Boston	Massachusetts ..	38,166	50,877	7,688	96,731
Chicago	Illinois	44,238	35,532	4,543	84,313
Charleston	South Carolina ..	8,712	1,317	772	10,801
Cincinnati	Ohio	33,911	12,612	2,771	49,294
Cleveland	Ohio	12,553	5,608	1,238	19,399
Columbus	Ohio	7,062	1,817	161	9,040
Hartford	Connecticut	4,309	1,116	305	5,730
Louisville	Kentucky	14,071	5,484	209	19,764
Nashville	Tennessee	9,709	2,756	210	12,675
New York	New York	127,116	109,548	29,166	265,830
New Orleans	Louisiana	53,813	31,161	5,389	90,363
Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	50,196	14,015	3,593	67,804
Richmond	Virginia	15,056	1,556	802	17,414
St. Louis	Missouri	68,072	33,748	6,236	108,056
Brooklyn	New York	10,797	2,960	1,152	14,909
Detroit	Michigan	11,572	5,058	1,069	17,699
Indianapolis	Indiana	9,061	5,892	213	15,166
Lowell	Massachusetts ..	8,557	3,557	142	12,256
Memphis	Tennessee	37,417	8,510	2,239	48,166
Mobile	Alabama	13,321	1,088	426	14,835
Pittsburg	Pennsylvania	15,060	4,116	962	20,138
Providence	Rhode Island	8,573	2,787	296	11,656
Rochester	New York	11,162	4,194	1,101	16,457
Savannah	Georgia	5,910	1,261	408	7,579
Syracuse	New York	7,020	2,037	241	9,298
Troy	New York	4,364	1,016	467	5,847
Washington	Dis. of Columbia	13,264	9,280	823	23,367
		678,139	394,793	76,940	1,149,874
Add letters returned to department held for postage and badly directed					45,773
Estimated number of letters received from 18 other offices, making similar returns		56,688	9,588	2,200	68,476
Total					1,264,123

C.

Statement of dead letters containing money, registered and sent out for delivery to the writers or owners thereof, from July 1, 1854, to July 1, 1859, annually, and also during the three quarters from July 1, 1859, to April 1, 1860.

Year ending—	Number of money letters sent out for delivery.	Aggregate contents of letters sent out.	Number of letters delivered.	Aggregate amount of money restored in letters deliver'd.	Number of letters returned unclaimed and outstand'g.	Contents of unclaimed letters on hand and outstanding.	
						Nominal value.	Worthless.
June 30, 1855....	9,127	\$53,594 58	7,477	\$46,693 43	1,650	\$6,901 15	\$340 00
June 30, 1856....	11,887	71,153 50	9,971	62,626 42	1,916	8,527 08	940 25
June 30, 1857....	8,828	52,246 84	7,615	47,245 05	1,213	5,001 79	384 00
June 30, 1858....	9,935	53,524 23	8,782	48,489 35	1,153	4,737 88	297 00
June 30, 1859....	9,726	45,718 14	8,574	41,143 74	1,152	4,195 90	378 50
Three quarters ending March 31, 1860.....	7,448	38,356 35	6,276	32,877 42	1,172	5,147 93	331 00

Estimated number for the year ending 30th June, 1860, 9,930.

D.

Statement of dead letters containing articles of value other than money registered and sent out for delivery to the writers or owners, thereof, annually from July 1, 1854, to July 1, 1859, and for the three quarters from July 1, 1859, to April 1, 1860.

Year ending—	Number of letters sent out.	Number of letters delivered.	Number of letters returned unclaimed.	Number of letters outstanding.	Contents of letters sent out.							
					Bills of exchange, drafts, and letters of credit; bonds and notes of hand; checks, orders, and treasury warrants; certificates of deposit, accounts, and receipts.	Deeds, mortgages, conveyances, and land titles.	Articles of agreement, powers of attorney, and policies of insurance.	Passage certificates and certificates of stock.	Pension papers, land certificates, and patent papers.	Court papers.	Miscellaneous.	Daguerreotypes.
June 30, 1855.....	6,414	5,306	1,092	16	\$1,595,975 76	367	178	49	182	118	993
June 30, 1856.....	6,728	5,884	818	26	2,122,194 89	526	174	67	176	109	1,039
June 30, 1857.....	8,124	7,114	950	60	3,792,515 76	688	214	72	321	115	1,053
June 30, 1858.....	9,006	8,200	769	37	2,706,106 69	921	265	167	396	125	1,018
June 30, 1859.....	8,647	7,738	830	79	2,558,107 11	882	301	133	230	86	753
Three quarters ending March 31, 1860...	10,075	9,298	624	153	2,802,530 79	651	281	97	156	186	952	803

Estimated number of letters sent out for year ending June 30, 1860, 13,433.

E.

Statement of dead letters received in the Dead Letter Office at San Francisco during the year ending September 30, 1859.

From offices in California.	From offices in Oregon.	From offices in Washington Territory.	Total.
66,420	3,584	1,432	71,436
Letters held for postage.....			2,099
Foreign letters returned to department.....			4,821
Valuable letters returned to department.....			360
Total number returned to department.....			5,181
Opened and disposed of in San Francisco.....			68,354